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ABSTRACT

As the British business community becomes increasingly internationalized, it should show more interest in language-related matters. After a review of the literature, this paper reports on a study of the 100 largest British industrial companies. The conclusions are as follows: (1) a wide variety of British employees are involved in international business correspondence tasks; (2) employees are selected for international business correspondence tasks primarily because of their business-related, not language- and communication-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes; (3) English is the dominant language in outgoing and incoming international business correspondence; (4) about half of the companies use their own employees to translate international business correspondence unless it is highly complex or technical; (5) employees who are fluent for business purposes in a second language would be satisfactorily prepared for international business communication in most companies; and (6) most companies have small proportions of employees who can transact business in two or more languages. Contains 21 references. (Author/LB)

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Abstract

As the British business community becomes increasingly internationalized, it should show more interest in language-related matters. Since the literature review revealed little information about the language-related practices and perspectives of large British companies, a study of the 100-largest British industrial companies was conducted. Major conclusions follow: (1) A wide variety of British employees are involved in international business-correspondence tasks. (2) Employees are selected for international business-correspondence tasks primarily because of their business-related, not language- and communication-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes. (3) English is the dominant language in outgoing and incoming international business correspondence. (4) About half of the companies use their own employees to translate international business correspondence unless it is highly complex or technical. (5) Employees who are fluent for business purposes in a second language would be satisfactorily prepared for international business communication in most companies. (6) Most companies have small proportions of employees who can transact business in two or more languages.

(7) Employees who can transact business in two or more languages primarily developed this ability through prior schooling or military training, company-provided instruction, and employee-provided instruction. (8) French, German, and Spanish are the business foreign languages most often recommended for native English speakers. (9) Nearly three fourths of the respondents reported that being aware of and sensitive to differences in English language usage is important, very important, or critically important for persons engaged in international business correspondence. (10) Nearly eight out of ten respondents support the teaching of international business-correspondence concepts and skills, including business foreign languages, somewhere. Consequently, there is a growing need in the United Kingdom for increased education and training relating to international business correspondence and business foreign languages.

Understanding the Perceptions of the British Business Community Regarding Language-Related Matters*

The European Community is progressively establishing a single market during the period ending December 31, 1992, and businesspersons in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (U.K.) are realizing that they will have access to new and expanding business opportunities abroad. This potential 323-million-person market, which already consumes more than half of all exports of the U.K., was valued at more than £40 billion in 1988 and is expected to grow (The Single Market, 1989). Other overseas markets also offer significant growth potential for progressive U.K. businesses.

The increasing internationalization of British business magnifies the need for employees of U.K.-based companies to be able to work effectively with people from other cultures and countries (Management Challenges, 1989). In a survey conducted by

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researchers from Newcastle Polytechnic, respondents from 54 percent of the sampled U.K. companies acknowledged that the company they represent had lost trading opportunities with foreigners because the company did not have employees who could communicate in the appropriate languages (Segal, 1987). Since there is clear evidence of a direct link between export performance and foreign language proficiency (The Single Market, 1989), companies in the U.K. should be concerned about their language-related practices and perspectives. But are they? What are the current language-related practices and perspectives within the business community in the U.K? What are the implications of this for those who provide education and training?

Literature Review

English is widely regarded as the language of international business (Colback & Maconochie, 1989). In fact, 80 percent of all of the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems is stored in English, and 70 percent of the world's mail is written in English ("Global Diary," 1989).

Since the English language exists in a variety of forms, some have recommended the use of straightforward

Standard English for business purposes while acknowledging variations in usage among well-educated persons in English-speaking countries (Birkel, 1988; McDowell, 1987). Others have pointed out the need to develop linguistically and culturally fluent international businesspersons (Kohut & Baxter, 1985; Paulsell, 1987; Victor, 1992). While opinions differ about which foreign languages to teach native English speakers for business purposes, support for business foreign language courses is growing in the U.K. and the U.S.A. (Gould, 1986; Grosse, 1985; Scott, in press). Instruction that teaches English for business purposes to native speakers of other languages has also been advocated in the U.K. and the U.S.A. (Directory of Programmes, 1990; Duran, 1987). The roles of language and cross-cultural training in American multinational corporations have been investigated (Inman, 1985; Zimpfer & Underwood, 1988), although comparable information from a British perspective was not uncovered.

The international business letter-writing practices of large U.S.A.-based companies were explored by Kilpatrick (1984). She identified and analyzed practices relating to the languages, writing style, and

formatting standards in international business letters sent and received by major U.S.A.-based companies. The literature search did not reveal any comparable or related British studies, although it did reveal the existence of a number of British guidebooks for writing domestic- and foreign-bound business letters. The literature search did uncover a BETRO Trust report that indicated that 80 percent of the surveyed British exporting companies seldom correspond in any language other than English (Lowe, 1982).

Methodology

A two-part questionnaire was developed based upon the literature search information. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to gather information relating to demographic factors, and the second part was designed to gather information relating to language-related and other international business-communication-related practices and perspectives. Copies of the research materials were pilot tested and refined before being mailed to each of the 100-largest British industrial companies as listed in The Times 1000: Leading Companies in Britain and Overseas, 1988-1989 ed. (Allen, 1988). These companies were selected for study because it was thought that their trend-

setting practices and perspectives would represent the current and near future states of British language-related and international business-communication-related practices and perspectives better than those of any other group.

The research materials were addressed to each of the managing directors (chief executive officers), who was asked to route the three-page questionnaire and accompanying pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope to the person within his or her company who was most knowledgeable about the language-related and international business-communication-related practices and perspectives of the company. Given the wide variety of organizational structures within the sampled companies, it was not possible to mail the research materials directly to potential respondents because it was impossible to identify in advance their names and job titles. Follow-up communications with replacement questionnaires and envelopes were twice mailed to each managing director of a nonresponding company at approximately one-month intervals.

By the deadline for receiving questionnaires after the second follow-up, 42 of the 100-largest British companies had responded in some manner. Respondents

from 26 companies provided significant amounts of usable data on their questionnaire forms. Although the usable response rate based on questionnaire completion was 26 percent, there is evidence that this response rate is typical when questionnaires are mailed to British businesses for completion (M. P. Broussine, personal communication, January 16, 1990; Management Challenges, 1989).

A variety of unstated culturally rooted factors may have influenced the usable response rate. In the U.K. business-related information is generally not as accessible to outsiders as it is in the U.S.A., especially if the information involves sensitive or potentially embarrassing matters (Scott, 1990). Furthermore, the questionnaire probed into such matters as business foreign-language skills, training and development of employees, international business-correspondence practices, and international business perspectives, all of which historically have been perceived as having relatively low value within the British business community (M. P. Broussine, personal communication, January 16, 1990). Thus, these unstated culturally rooted factors may have diminished the willingness of some potential respondents to complete

their questionnaires.

In terms of both demographic factors and response patterns on selected questionnaire items, no significant differences were found between the early and the late respondents. This suggests that had the nonrespondents actually responded, they would have done so similarly to the respondents and that despite the nonresponse factor, the respondents appear to be representative of the population.

Representatives from 16 companies were unable to complete their questionnaires. Among the reasons cited and the respective frequencies were these: the company is unable to provide the requested data because of decentralized management, corporate diversity, or time and cost constraints, 7 representatives; the company has a policy that prohibits the completion of questionnaires, 5 representatives; the company engages in minimal international business correspondence, 2 representatives; and the company no longer exists as a separate entity because of merger or acquisition, 2 representatives. Nevertheless, several of these representatives did provide written narratives about the language-related practices and perspectives within their respective companies.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the gathered data are as complete and as representative as can be expected given the unique characteristics of the British business subculture.

Demographics

The typical respondent from the 100-largest British industrial companies was a male between 41 and 50 years old who had been employed between 16 and 20 years in his profession; he worked in the manufacturing industry for a company with fewer than 25,000 employees who generated annual revenue of between the equivalent of $1 billion and $5 billion derived from 60 percent domestic and 40 percent foreign sources.

Findings

Findings are presented in eight subsections: Involved Employees, Used Languages, Translation Practices, Language-Related Estimates, Language-Related Education and Training, Recommended Languages, English-Language Perceptions, and Instructional Preferences.

Involved Employees

The respondents reported that for the indicated types of workers in the companies they represent, the following percentages are involved in international business correspondence: Executive, administrative,

and managerial workers (ex. marketing managers), 92.3 percent; professional workers (ex. engineers) 80.0%; sales workers (ex. marketing representatives), 76.9 percent; clerical- and administrative-support workers (ex. secretaries), 73.1 percent; technical and related support workers (ex. engineering technicians), 61.5 percent; and farming, forestry, and fishing workers (ex. farmers), 3.8 percent. No respondent reported that service workers (ex. security guards); precision production, craft, and repair workers (ex. mechanics); or operating, fabricating, and laboring workers (ex. machine operators) are involved in international business correspondence.

The respondents reported that when the companies they represent select employees for international business-correspondence tasks, the selection criteria are ranked in this decreasing order of importance: (1) technical or managerial ability, (2) ability to adapt to new situations, (3) previous international experience, (4) language and communication ability, and (5) other factors.

Used Languages

Table 1 shows that on average in the studied British companies, 90.0 percent of the total outgoing

international business correspondence and 85.9 percent of the total incoming international business correspondence are written in the English language.

Translation Practices

The translation practices for international business correspondence and the respective percentages of responding companies using those practices follow: The company usually has one of its own employees translate the business correspondence unless it is highly complex or technical, 42.4 percent; the company always has one of its own employees translate the business correspondence, 15.4 percent; the company usually depends on translators outside the company to translate the business correspondence unless it is very simple and nontechnical, 11.5 percent; the company always depends on translators outside of the company to translate the business correspondence, 7.7 percent; the company uses a combination of the described translation practices, 19.2 percent; and no response, 3.8 percent.

Language-Related Estimates

Table 2 shows that in the studied companies, being fluent for business purposes in second and third languages is perceived to be of moderate to low importance.

Table 1

Languages Used in Outgoing and Incoming International Business Correspondence

Mean percentage of total outgoing correspondence using the language	Language	Mean percentage of total incoming correspondence using the language
.7%	Arabic	1.1%
.9%	Chinese	.6%
90.0%	English	85.9%
2.7%	French	3.4%
1.6%	German	2.6%
.8%	Italian	.9%
.7%	Japanese	.8%
.4%	Korean	.4%
.8%	Portuguese	.8%
.5%	Russian	.8%
.7%	Spanish	2.5%
.2%	Other	.2%

Note. Other languages used in outgoing international

(table continues)

business correspondence include Polish, Turkish, and Welsh.

Note. Other languages used in incoming international business correspondence include Danish, Dutch, Hungarian, Norwegian, Polish, Swedish, Turkish, and Welsh.

Table 3 shows that in the studied companies low percentages of employees are estimated to be fluent for business purposes in second and third languages.

Language-Related Education and Training

The respondents reported that the following primary means are used by the indicated percentages of company employees to obtain competency for business purposes in their second and third languages: prior schooling or military training, 23.1 percent; company-provided instruction, 15.4 percent; employee-provided instruction, 7.7 percent; previous residency abroad, 0.0 percent; family associations, 0.0 percent; a combination of the identified primary means, 42.3 percent; and no response, 11.5 percent.

Recommended Languages

The following percentages of respondents recommended that those preparing for business careers study the specified languages in addition to

Table 2

Perceived Importance of Company Employees' Being Fluent for Business Purposes in Second and Third Languages

Percent of companies in which being fluent for business purposes in a second language is important to the specified degree	Importance degree	Percent of companies in which being fluent for business purposes in a third language is important to the specified degree
3.8%	Critically important	0.0%
11.5%	Very important	3.8%
26.9%	Important	7.7%
30.9%	Somewhat important	19.2%
19.2%	Not important	53.9%
7.7%	No response	15.4%

English: French, 92.3 percent; German, 84.6 percent; Spanish, 73.1 percent; Japanese, 50.0 percent;

Table 3

Estimated Percentages of Employees Who Are Fluent for Business Purposes in Second and Third Languages

Percent of companies with the indicated percents of employees fluent for business purposes in a second language	Percent of employees	Percent of companies with the indicated percents of employees fluent for business purposes in a third language
57.8%	1-10%	69.4%
7.7%	11-20%	3.8%
11.5%	21-30%	3.8%
3.8%	31-40%	3.8%
3.8%	41-50%	0.0%
0.0%	51-60%	0.0%
0.0%	61-70%	0.0%
0.0%	71-80%	0.0%
0.0%	81-90%	0.0%
0.0%	91-100%	0.0%
15.4%	No Response	19.2%

Portuguese, 34.6 percent; Russian, 34.6 percent;

Chinese, 30.8 percent; Italian, 30.8 percent; Arabic, 26.9 percent; and Korean, 19.2 percent.

English-Language Perceptions

The respondents reported that in the companies they represent, being aware of and sensitive to the differences in English language usage among well-educated persons from various English-speaking countries is important in the following percentages: critically important, 3.8 percent; very important, 26.9 percent; important, 38.6 percent; somewhat important, 19.2 percent; not important, 7.7 percent; and no response, 3.8 percent.

Instructional Preferences

While 19.2 percent of the respondents reported that international business-correspondence concepts and skills do not need to be taught, 30.9 percent of the respondents reported that these concepts and skills should be taught in the workplace; 19.2 percent of the respondents reported that these concepts and skills should be taught in specialized business communication courses or programs; 15.4 percent of the respondents reported that these concepts and skills should be taught throughout business courses or programs; 11.5 percent of the respondents reported that these concepts

and skills should be taught through some combination of the workplace, in specialized business communication courses or programs, and/or throughout business courses or programs; and 3.8 percent provided no response.

Discussion

The discussion is presented in eight subsections: Involved Employees, Used Languages, Translation Practices, Language-Related Estimates, Language-Related Education and Training, Recommended Languages, English-Language Perceptions, and Instructional Preferences.

Involved Employees

A wide variety of types of British workers, especially ones in more responsible positions, are involved in international business correspondence. Those who engage in international business correspondence are more likely to have been selected by their employers for this activity on the basis of their business-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes rather than on the basis of their language- and communication-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Used Languages

While the studied British companies send outgoing international business correspondence in a wide variety of languages, they use the English language for nine

out of ten pieces of outgoing international business correspondence. This statistic is somewhat higher than that suggested in the earlier BETRO Trust report (Lowe, 1982).

Although the studied British companies receive incoming international business correspondence written in a wide variety of languages, more than eight out of ten pieces of incoming international business correspondence are written in English. This substantiates that although English is not the native language of many international businesspersons, they are able to use the English language for business purposes, reaffirming English as the language of international business.

Translation Practices

While the responding British companies use a variety of methods for the translation of international business correspondence, the predominant approach, used by nearly half, is having one of the company employees translate the business correspondence unless it is highly complex or technical. About three times as many of the studied companies use their own employees rather than outsiders to translate international business correspondence. Prospective and

practicing British businesspersons who have business-foreign-language-translation competencies may have a competitive advantage over others who do not since most British companies at least occasionally need the professional services of business foreign-language translators.

Language-Related Estimates

While about four out of ten of the British respondents perceived fluency for business purposes in a second language to be critically important, very important, or important in the companies they represent, about five out of ten of them perceived fluency for business purposes in a third language to be not important. Consequently, it appears that prospective and practicing British businesspersons would be satisfactorily prepared for international business communication in the majority of British companies comparable to the studied ones if such businesspersons developed proficiency in a second language for business purposes.

More than five out of ten of all respondents estimated that only 1-10 percent of the employees of the companies they represent are fluent for business purposes in a second language, while nearly seven out

of ten of all respondents estimated that only 1-10 percent of the employees of the companies they represent are fluent for business purposes in a third language. Although a few of the studied companies have substantial proportions of employees who can transact business in two or more languages, most of the studied companies have small proportions of employees who can transact business in two or more languages.

British educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary (higher and further education) level, should intensify efforts to offer instruction that develops both business-related and foreign-language-related skills so that large numbers of future businesspersons are both managerially and linguistically competent. If British primary and secondary educational institutions were to emphasize the acquisition of foreign-language competencies to the same degree as some of their European counterparts, then considerably less time would be required at tertiary educational institutions to develop needed business foreign-language competencies. Other types of providers should also make business foreign-language education and training readily accessible to prospective and practicing businesspersons.

Language-Related Education and Training

Nearly five out of ten of the employees with proficiency for business purposes in second and third languages used a combination of prior schooling or military training, company-provided instruction, and employee-provided instruction to develop their language competencies for business purposes. Consequently, a variety of channels for obtaining needed business foreign-language competencies should continue to be available to prospective and practicing businesspersons in the U.K.

Recommended Languages

The study respondents most frequently recommended French, German, and Spanish as foreign languages for business purposes. This is not surprising since these are the three foreign languages most often used in incoming international business correspondence, since these foreign languages are the ones most often available for study in the U.K., and since these foreign languages are the ones used by a number of major British trading partners. That no respondent recommended Dutch ignores the fact that the Netherlands accounts for the fourth largest percentage of total British exports, about 7 percent (Overseas Trade

Statistics, 1987), although it should be noted that many businesspersons from the Netherlands also communicate fluently in English. The fact that Italian is recommended relatively infrequently by the respondents is interesting since Italy accounts for the fifth largest percentage of total British exports, about 5 percent (Overseas Trade Statistics, 1987), although many businesspersons from Italy also communicate fluently in English. Since Sweden receives the eighth largest share of total British exports, about 3 percent (Overseas Trade Statistics, 1987), Swedish might also be considered; nevertheless, many businesspersons from Sweden also communicate fluently in English, and Swedish, like Dutch, is not a major business language in any other country. Because Saudi Arabia receives the tenth largest share of total British exports, more than 2 percent (Overseas Trade Statistics, 1987), Arabic should be taught.

The fact that half of the respondents recommended Japanese must primarily reflect the significant economic power of Japan since less than 2 percent of all British exports actually go to Japan (Overseas Trade Statistics, 1987). Since no Portuguese-speaking country is among the top-20 British trading partners,

its actual importance for business purposes may be overstated by the respondents. Although no Russian-speaking country is among the top-20 trading partners, Russian might prove to be a valuable language for expanding trading opportunities with Eastern European countries that until recently were dominated by what was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and with the countries that formerly constituted the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The recommendations of both Chinese and Korean must primarily be based on possible future trading prospects since countries using these languages are not currently major British trading partners.

Given the large number of foreign languages that have potential for British business purposes, British educational institutions should give first priority to important official European Community languages, such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish, which are also used by trading partners outside of the European Community. British educational institutions should give second priority to languages of less important current trading areas and countries, such as Arabic and Japanese. British educational institutions should give third priority to languages of potentially important

trading areas and countries, such as Russian, Chinese, and Korean. Not only those who offer business foreign-language instruction but also prospective and practicing businesspersons should be guided by these priorities when selecting business foreign languages.

English-Language Perceptions

The fact that nearly seven out of ten of the respondents reported that being aware of and sensitive to differences in English language usage is critically important, very important, or important for persons engaged in international business correspondence is significant, especially when the historic island-fortress mentality and ethnocentrism of the British people are considered. The relatively small percentage of British respondents reporting that being aware of and sensitive to differences in English language usage is not important documents a dramatic change in British attitudes. The apparent willingness of many of the responding British businesspersons to acknowledge that variations of their language for business purposes are deemed to be somewhat comparable to their own version of the English language for business purposes substantiates growing attention and value attached to the perspectives of other cultural groups, which

ultimately facilitate trading opportunities abroad.

Instructional Preferences

The fact that nearly eight out of ten of the respondents support the teaching of international business-correspondence concepts and skills somewhere is noteworthy since this position deviates from the longstanding viewpoint of the British business community that the development of all types of business communication skills is of low priority except possibly for those who are clerical- and administrative-support workers. The contrast is intensified when it is recalled that according to study data, larger percentages of British executive, administrative, and managerial workers; professional workers; and sales workers actually engage in international business correspondence than do clerical- and administrative-support workers. Consequently, a wide spectrum of British businesspersons--not just clerical- and administrative-support workers--needs accessible opportunities inside and outside of the workplace to develop needed international business-correspondence knowledge, skills, and attitudes, including business foreign-language knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Overall, the study findings suggest that there is

a need in the U.K. for increased education and training relating to international business correspondence and business foreign languages. Relevant formal and informal education and training opportunities in international business correspondence and in business foreign languages should be provided for all types of prospective and practicing British businessperson not only in the workplace but also in the professional preparation programs throughout the U.K. Both professional bodies and tertiary educational institutions, which together have responsibility for most British professional qualifications, including certificates, licenses, and other types of professional credentials, have important roles to fulfill in the development of international business-correspondence and business foreign-language knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Selected professional bodies might, for example, develop and refine credentials in international business correspondence and in specific business foreign languages. Tertiary education institutions might, for example, develop the needed international business-correspondence and business foreign-language knowledge, skills, and attitudes by devoting more attention to both domestic and foreign

business communication. Tertiary educational institutions could infuse the necessary business communication-related instruction into existing business-related courses and programs and could develop specialized business communication-related courses and programs.

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